

# Music and Genocide

AN EMORY GRADUATE STUDENT EXPLORES HER EXPERIENCE AS A HUMAN RIGHTS VOLUNTEER IN RWANDA

*By Laura Emiko Soltis*



“**M**usic” and “genocide” are two words that are rarely associated with one another. Yet through the unlikely intersections of experience, they have come to shape the most meaningful direction in my life. When my mother first placed a one-sixteenth-sized violin under my chubby, three-year-old chin, she never imagined that it would be my ticket to see the world. Since then, I have performed in concert halls and on street corners in countries such as Croatia, Poland, China, and Guatemala, and have come to use music as my means of communication and personal connection. The memories I have of musical performance and my awakening into social consciousness are often indistinguishable, as my journeys were often made with a violin case slung across my back.

As an undergraduate, I pursued my interests in the disciplines of violin performance and international affairs. Throughout my coursework, the repeated mention of the genocides that haunted the 20th-century had a particularly profound impact on me. The more I studied the topic, the more I felt both devastated and intrigued.

In the fall of 2005, I began working at The Carter Center as an intern in its Human Rights Program. While there, I was assigned the task of coordinating a musical program for the 2006 Human Rights Defenders Conference. In partnership with composer Lee Johnson, I contributed to the composition of “Symphony No. 7, Infinitude,” which incorporated the text of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. We invited Rwandan singer Corneille to perform at the conference, and when I heard him sing “Reposez en Paix,” (“Rest in Peace”), a song dedicated to his mother who was killed during the genocide in the summer of 1994, I recognized the coherence of my seemingly unrelated interests. I also decided that day that it was time to experience Rwanda firsthand.

I left for Rwanda the day after Christmas with an open mind, but I never anticipated I would change so drastically in the three short weeks that followed. I spent my first week in Rwanda with a host family in Kigali while I attended a local human rights forum.



Sponsored by the organizations Global Youth Connect and Never Again Rwanda, the forum brought together student activists from universities in Rwanda with a group of international delegates with human rights experience from the United States, Cambodia, China, Mexico, France, and Haiti. The agenda was focused but ambitious: to discuss justice and reconciliation issues in Rwanda, to initiate action plans such as improving access to HIV/AIDS treatment, to design formal sexual education curricula, and to create public awareness radio programs on the issue of race relations.

We also spent time interviewing Rwandans about their memories of the summer of 1994. In the U.S., any one of their stories would qualify for an intimate interview on the Oprah Winfrey Show. In Rwanda, however, the citizens undergo a daily battle of remembering and forgetting horrific violence within their collective struggle for lasting peace.

During my stay in Kigali, I also served as a volunteer with Uyisenga n’Manzi, an organization created to help address the problems of the most marginalized individuals after the genocide – namely the quarter million women who were raped (70 percent of whom contracted HIV/AIDS) and the 300,000 children who were left without parents. I maintained a schedule filled with visits to various non-governmental organizations, on community sustainability projects, and meetings with government representatives. My daily work involved writing funding proposals and reports in English, as well as the more interactive task of taking testimony of rural child-headed households and conducting evaluations of the progress of the self-supporting orphan community networks organized by Uyisenga n’Manzi.

There is something very valuable and fulfilling in the act of making the physical journey to the villages ordinarily isolated from outside contact. An interview with a boy named Shinjiro was particularly moving, and I haven’t been able to stop thinking about it since I returned. I was with the director of the organization and our translator, and we had traveled two hours to the Eastern Province to record Shinjiro’s experience during the genocide and to monitor his transition into the new house that our organization was building for his family. Shinjiro was much smaller than me, and I was startled to find out that we were both 22 years old. He was just 10 years old when he witnessed his parents’ murder, and after learning that all of his extended family had been killed as

well, he was left to take care of his infant twin sisters by himself. While telling me this, Shinjiro was unable to look anyone in the eyes and mumbled quietly into his shoulder. The translator commented that his condition was one of the worst cases of post-traumatic stress he had ever seen. Underneath the shade of a banana tree, I asked him occasional questions about his daily routine and at times, we just sat together in silence. As we walked through the rows of maize to visit the construction of his new house, I began singing a Rwandan folk song a friend had taught me. Shinjiro suddenly turned around, and forgetting to hide his smile, joined me wholeheartedly. Leaving Uyisenga n’Manzi on my final day was especially difficult, but everyone at the office seemed confident when they bid me farewell, saying “see you soon.”



As a first-year graduate student at Emory, I am now pursuing a graduate certificate in human rights and studying violin with the School of Music. I will one day return to Rwanda, perhaps to fulfill my promise to a friend to organize a reconciliation concert throughout the Great Lakes region. Of all of the amazing experiences I had in Rwanda, the most important lesson I learned was about myself. In a world of so many injustices, there is one thing that I can control – how I treat each person I encounter in life. It seems almost silly to think that I had to go all the way to Rwanda to figure this out, because while I have long known this, I feel so different now that I can finally and truly live it. ❁

*Laura Emiko Soltis is a first year graduate student at Emory’s Institute of Liberal Arts. She is pursuing a graduate certificate in human rights, studying violin and voice, and performing with the Emory Concert Choir.*



*Laura Emiko Soltis with former President Jimmy Carter and his wife, Rosalynn, taken during Soltis’ internship at The Carter Center in fall 2005. Photo by A. Poyo*